

*Dear Friends:*

*In the wake of the horrific tragedy that occurred this week at Virginia Tech University, I re-read a piece I wrote last fall after the school shootings in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. The message resounds with chilling relevance today, and so, with minor revisions, I send it to you in hope that these thoughts may offer meaning, comfort and direction.*

*Humbly, in prayerful hope, Peter*

## **Safe Schools Can't Save Children**

Once again, we were reminded that hatred puts us all at risk and that every threat to peace begins in the hearts and minds of children. In the flash of an instant, gunfire shattered the lives of a college community and a nation, shaking the foundation of personal security and human trust for a new generation of Americans. The young survivors at Virginia Tech will hopefully recover emotionally and return to their freshly blossoming lives. Yet I suspect that their childhood faith in the greatness of human possibilities may be scarred for life. Their acute grief will likely heal but their capacity for inner peace and shared intimacy may be displaced forever.

How can we create peace in our homes, streets, schools and nations? Certainly, we must, as a moral society, restrict access to the means of violence. Well-intentioned citizens are calling for stricter gun control laws and tighter security systems at schools. Restricting access to weapons makes sense and yields positive results. Yet, just as access to healthcare does not, by itself, guarantee health, so too safety depends on removing access to deadly weapons and on removing a person's will to hate. Guns provide a means to kill, not a reason to kill. Schools and schoolyards serve their purpose when children feel like they are sanctuaries in which adults care about their well-being and development. Locked doorways, armed guards and electronic monitoring undermine children's sense of security by adding constant reminders of deadly threats that may lurk around every corner.

Given the countless sources for acquiring a deadly weapon, the task of disarming dangerous individuals becomes nearly impossible. Considering, on the other hand, the common psychological source for becoming a young killer, the achievable goal of prevention must focus on the early experiences of all children. Violence is an end product of hatred – usually self-hatred as much as hatred toward others. During the first years of life, children learn how the world values them. Kids who are loved consistently and unconditionally, whose parents and other caregivers demonstrate caring and service to others, whose families affiliate with a diverse group within a community, and who observe that skin color, wealth, education, and culture differentiate people's background but not their intrinsic worth, are children who will grow to feel connected and devoted to the dignity within everyone. Ultimately, violence is most vulnerable to the stronger

power of inner peace acquired when healthy relationships teach very young children the joy and satisfaction gained from caring about others.

In nearly all the awful instances of kids (and adults) killing kids, including the college student in Virginia, the perpetrators felt profoundly isolated and unaccepted. Violence erupted when these dangerous ingredients reached a boil inside the kettle of each killer's developing psyche. The force of the final violent explosion took many years to develop. The message seems clear to me. Violence prevention begins during early childhood as we work to understand, satisfy, guide and model for our children. Recent scientific research teaches that the emotional experience of infants and very young children directs the wiring of nerves in the developing brain. Our ability to control our emotions, to regulate our physical response to stress, even our capacity to muster an effective immune response to infection was shaped by experiences during the first years of life. Indeed, it turns out that by building children's self-worth and self-respect during infancy and early childhood, we increase their later inclination toward compassionate behavior and nonviolent conflict resolution. Children begin to learn as soon as they are born. Most of all, they learn how much others support, value, respect, enjoy and expect of them. Every infant has a unique way of communicating just as every adult has his or her own style of acting, thinking, and relating. In loving our children, we celebrate these individual characteristics and help them to build an expectation for success later in life. If not, a young child's subtle differences in temperament or way of thinking can grow, with age, into irrevocable gulfs of misunderstanding, miscommunication, emotional distance, self-doubt, self-hatred and, ultimately, existential anger.

Reinforcing the positive behavior of individual families, we must advocate for policies that support parents' efforts to rear caring and responsible children. Here are a few examples. Unlike prior generations, today's parents are more likely to spend much of the day away from home. Most parents of preschool age children are employed and must rely on substitute caregivers to provide childcare in their absence. Our nation should be able to set and monitor high quality standards for the non-parental care of young children to insure that parents' efforts get supported and reinforced. Television, movies, the Internet and music are equally powerful forces that influence the behavior and thinking of every child in America. Our sophisticated entertainment media must realize that they have perverted their power to educate and inspire. Top-selling movies, television shows and music fan the flames of interpersonal and cross-cultural violence by dramatizing a callous degradation of our common humanity and the fundamental life-serving strength of our diversity.

Such policies and resources capitalize on the deadliest roots of our current insecurity - the despair, anxiety, distrust and hostility bred from growing up disconnected and devalued. It becomes harder to hate others if we learn early in life to feel loved and connected. Here each of us plays a central role in building peace. In the end, guns would have no use if we love our children unconditionally, relate to our neighbors, build community, model caring and service, value diversity of ideas, customs, traditions and expressions, and open our minds to new relationships and ideas. Children who grow up isolated - emotionally, intellectually, and culturally - are those most likely to continue to

sow the seeds of fear, distrust, hostility, and violence. Peace is a precious flower, much like the fateful columbine. And, alongside the families of Littleton, Colorado who named their high school after one of nature's most beautiful charms, I hope we will all find our way back to the garden. Last autumn, we learned a strong lesson about the power of love from the Amish families in Pennsylvania when their religious commitment to peace was tragically tested by a stranger whose inner rage burned out of control. Mourning the violent death of their children, they reminded us all of the healing power of forgiveness. Though they will never forget the violence that stole their children's futures, this community demonstrated the difference between the diseased person and the conditions that crippled his capacity to love. We must all work tirelessly to create communities where neighbors connect socially, where businesses thrive in providing residents with the opportunity to earn a fair wage, and where all children have access to quality health care, education, recreation and protection.

Speaking of meaningful support, we all should take personal responsibility for helping children and their families feel connected to friends and neighbors. How many of us feel a sense of community where we live? How many of us would boast that our community welcomes new and old alike, tolerates, appreciates and joins people of diverse ethnicities, cultures, traditions, faiths and ideas? How many adults teach children by example the personal rewards of regular volunteer service to others? Peer support for parents, community service, neighbors actively concerned for each other's families – research demonstrates that where these social conditions thrive, communities experience lower levels of violent crime and higher levels of population health.

When our babies grow old enough to develop active friendships, they become extremely sensitive to the words and actions of their peers. Forming peer relationships is the principal effort of the preschool and early school aged child. Fortunately, children at this age wear their feelings on their sleeves. All we need to do is ask, listen to and comfort them as they work to establish their first relationships beyond the family. Social experience, of course, continues to play a primary role in children's development beyond early childhood. For adolescents, peer group acceptance matters above all. Kids who have had positive relationships when they were young, bring an expectation for social success along with the practiced grace needed to connect with others at this delicate age.

So let's learn this lesson now and for all time – we can only secure peace by providing emotional security for all children. What are we teaching our children about tolerance, conflict resolution and humane behavior? We can only defend ourselves against violent acts if we inspire in children an alternative path to hatred. Killers, after all, are indistinguishable as babies. They just lose hope long before they ever find death.

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